While Navy jets such as these are used for rocket assaults, Skyraiders, like the one flown by Dengler, are used as attack-bombers.

ESCAPE From A North Vietnam Hell Camp

By Joseph E. Brown

For six nightmarish months the Reds tortured and starved Lieutenant Dengler. But they never broke the young Navy pilot's spirit—and on June 29th he shot his way out of his jungle prison and began an incredible 22 day march to freedom

It was nearly dawn. In a tangled jungle somewhere near the border of southern Laos and North Vietnam, U.S. Navy Lieutenant (junior grade) Dieter Dengler huddled against the pre-dawn cold and tried to sleep. It was July 19, 1966.

Thin streaks of sunlight had ignited the horizon, but Dengler saw nothing but blackness. The thick green canopy—he guessed the trees soared at least 150 feet high—blotted out everything, even time.

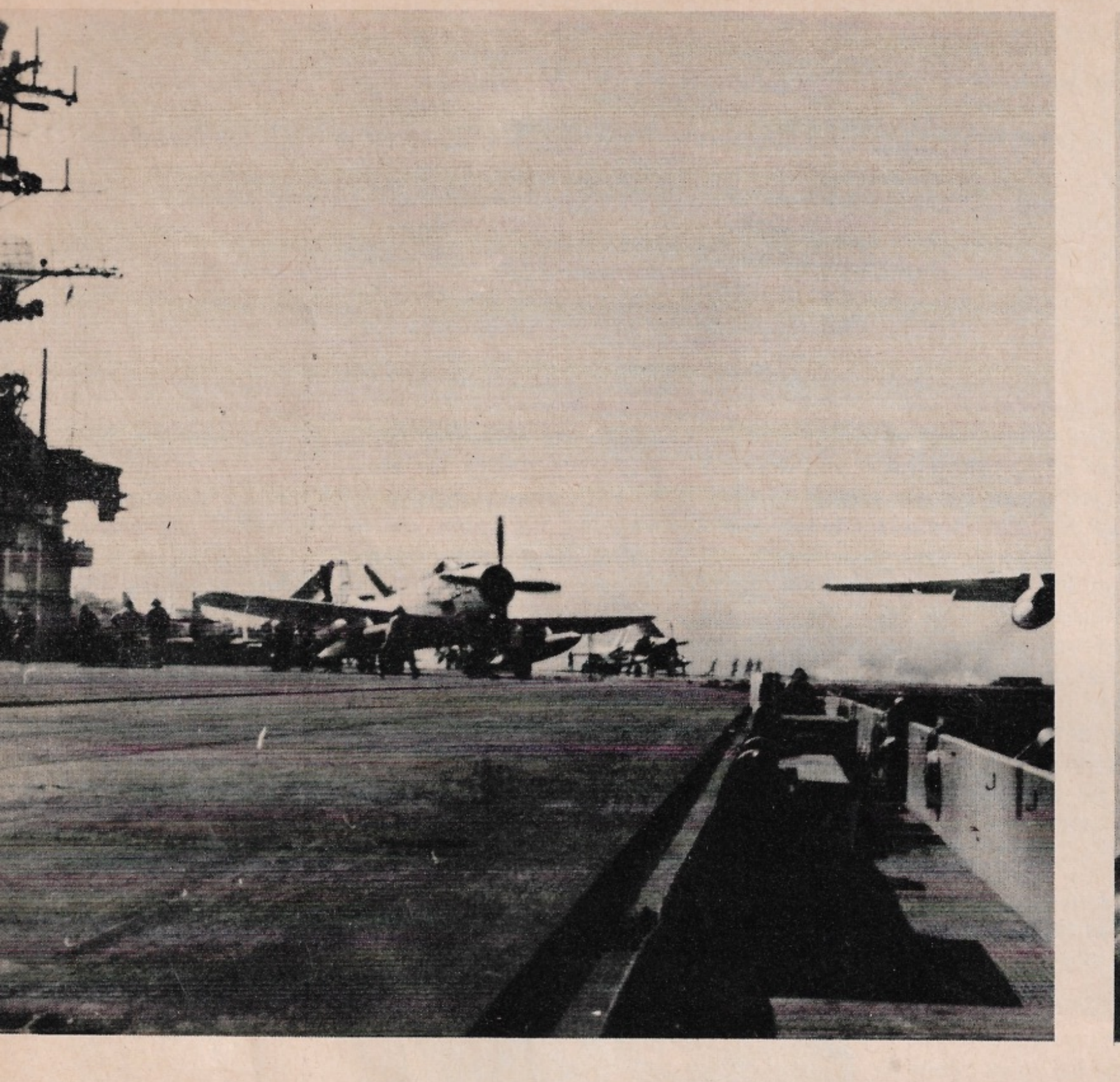
Fitfully, Dengler had managed to sink into a restless slumber an hour before, but a snake, slithering across his dirt-caked, shredded trousers, awakened him with a jolt. A few days earlier Dengler might have grabbed wildly for the snake, knowing it would quiet his growling stomach, but now he had lost even his desire for food.

With ebbing strength, he cursed the snake aloud, keeping his voice low to prevent it carrying to the communist enemy patrols he was sure were closing in. **Why,** he thought, **can't I just die here and end it all?**

Mechanically, Dengler touched his left lapel with fingertips so numb they no longer had feeling. But the cherished gold pilot's wings were not there. Then the fingers traveled up to the knotted, tough, black beard. Silently, he cursed that, too. He wished he could shave it off. Over the long months it had become a nesting place for every kind of biting, stinging insect in the jungle.

Dengler was bone tired, an emaciated, half-dead 98-pound human skeleton. Later, he was to candidly admit, "It was at this point that I started to go."—

Starved and tortured for months by his captors, Lt. Dieter Dengler weighed 98 pounds when this photo was taken in a hospital after his rescue.



Navy planes are launched from the deck of the *U.S.S. Ranger*—Lieutenant Dengler's ship—on a mission against North Vietnam.

meaning his mind, wracked by torture and horrible memories, had started to crack.

During the night, for instance, he had seen Roman chariots careening wildly through the jungle. On a hill slope nearby, almost hidden by the thick elephant grass, he could hear and see skiers at play. He had heard voices, too, but now he could not remember what they'd said. The hallucinations had vanished as quickly as they had come.

How long had he been here?

In Dengler's tortured mind, days had blended into each other. Time meant nothing. Was it a week? A month? Three months perhaps? He couldn't tell.

Until three days ago, he at least had company. Duane Martin—Lt. Duane Whitney Martin—had been with him, and life wasn't so bad.

In the past five months, Martin had been a close friend. Then, on July 16th, a machete, slashing wildly first across the knees, then at the neck, had parted the friendship forever.

Dengler tried hard to forget the horrible sight of blood gushing from Martin's throat. He tried to forget the terrible pain in his own legs and chest and fingers. Dengler now was hopelessly alone, and he tried to remember how it all began. . . .

It was February 1, 1966. A day before, the Americans began launching furious new air attacks against North Vietnamese targets to end a 36-day voluntary cease-fire. Lt. Dieter Dengler prepared for his first combat mission against the North.

An exceptionally handsome, German-born flier of 159 pounds and 28 years, Dengler had flown from the aircraft carrier **Ranger** in South Vietnam several times during January. But this day—and Dengler looked forward to it with apprehension—was to be

Lieutenant Dengler received an ovation from the Senate Armed Services Committee after he testified before them.

Viet Cong barracks, like the one pictured here, are prime targets for our bombers operating over North Vietnam.

ESCAPE *continued*

his first sortie against the vaunted, deadly SAM missiles, murderous ground fire and perhaps the Soviet-built MIGs for which he had been briefed and trained for many months.

"South Vietnam," a veteran fellow pilot had told him, "is a picnic compared to what you'll run into up North."

Dengler's boyish lips parted in a thin smile, exposing a row of perfect, gleaming white teeth. He did not answer. Instead, he began pulling on the trappings of his dangerous profession: a flight suit, G-suit, parachute, helmet, radio. Twice, he double-checked the items in his survival kit: compass, pistol, fishing line and spare hooks, mirror, high protein foodstuffs, including raisins, salted nuts and pepperoni, extra clothing and a green waterproof nylon sleeping bag.

Minutes later, his propeller-driven A-1 Skyraider attack bomber was taking off from the **Ranger's** flight deck. The day's target was a line of communist communications facilities in a mountainous region of North Vietnam, a rifle shot from the Laotian border.

Two things made the mission particularly dangerous. One was the fact that during the 36-day lull, the North Vietnamese had had ample time to rebuild and fortify their anti-aircraft defenses unmolested. The other was the weather.

As the aircraft neared the target, Dengler punched his microphone button. "Looks pretty dirty up there, doesn't it?" he queried his flight leader. "Think we can get through?"

"It could be worse," came a laconic reply.

Suddenly, through a hole in the overcast, Dengler spotted his target and rolled in. On the first pass, he felt the Skyraider shudder violently. His eyes

(Continued on page 61)

ESCAPE FROM A NORTH VIETNAMESE HELL CAMP

[*continued from page 45*]

widened as he looked at the right wing. He punched the mike button again.

"I've been hit bad," he reported, "but I can still handle it."

"Can you finish your run?"

"I'll try."

As the thick green landscape rushed toward him, Dengler punched his bomb release and wrenched the crippled craft out of the dive. He watched the crimson bomb bursts over his shoulder and smiled with immense satisfaction. A direct hit.

But the smile quickly faded as the Skyraider shook again and Dengler had to begin fighting to maintain control. Electing to crash-land rather than parachute into the uninviting terrain below, he radioed his flight leader once again.

"I've lost control. I'll never make it home . . . looking for a hole to put her down."

With sheer strength, Dengler maneuvered the injured Skyraider west toward Laos, the only place he knew which offered suitable terrain to land. As he looked for a clearing in the jungle, he jettisoned his flight charts (just why, the Navy has not said; it is assumed Dengler wanted to avoid having them in his possession in case of capture).

Almost miraculously, he rode the Skyraider to earth without serious injury. The aircraft's wings and tail were sheared off by the impact, but the pilot suffered only bruises on his left leg, and a small cut behind his right ear.

The impact did daze him, however, and when his head finally cleared, Dengler realized the noise he was hearing was yelling and shouting close by. With his charts gone, he didn't know his exact location, although he knew he was in Laos. In any case, no one had to tell him those voices weren't friendly.

Now the moment which Dengler had rehearsed many times had finally arrived. Lost in an alien, trackless jungle crawling with enemy troops, there was suddenly one single goal in his life: *rescue.*

In the Vietnam war, the Air Force and Navy have an incredible batting average in the field of rescue. Knowing this was reassuring to Lieutenant Dengler. But as the first shadows of evening caressed the thick green jungle, the reassurance began to fade.

He sized up his surroundings. The country was very hilly, and thickly covered with tall trees and tangled undergrowth. Only occasionally was the terrain broken by a clearing where he might signal a rescue helicopter. Deciding to travel light and gamble on rescue, he buried his .38 caliber pistol, radio and survival gear. *Later,* he thought at the time, *I can come back for them.*

The undergrowth clutched at his legs as he worked his way through the jungle, tiring him quickly. The heat of the sun turned the jungle into a living furnace, and Dengler could feel sweat running down his body into his boots. Still he pressed on.

Finally, with darkness upon him, he guessed that rescue efforts had been cancelled for the day. He looked for a place to hole up for the night, unwrapped the nylon sleeping bag—the only piece of survival gear he had kept—wrapped it around him, and tried to sleep.

Lying there in the black, trackless jungle, Dengler felt the crush of loneliness, a terrible, maddening loneliness,

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for the first time in his 28 years. In the early moments of drowsiness, before sleep overwhelmed him, his mind raced back through the years.

The time was late 1944. The place, the little town of Wildberg in mountainous southern Germany, where Dieter, then seven, and his brothers, Klaus, eight, and Martin, six, had lived since birth.

A year before, Dengler's mother, Mrs. Maria Dengler, had taken her youngsters into the Black Forest. "The day may come," she'd told them, "when you may have to survive in this forest by yourselves. No one will be here to show you how. So you must learn." The boys were taught which grasses were edible, which were not, how to find shelter from a rainstorm in a hollow tree, how to trap small wild animals, how to prepare a fire. It proved to be wise insurance against the future.

Toward the end of the war, with allied might storming toward Berlin, Mrs. Dengler moved to Calw, a small town near Stuttgart. The boys remained in Wildberg, in the care of friends.

Then it happened. The boys' father, a German soldier, was killed in action. With no one left to pay the rent in Wildberg, the youngsters were evicted. As pre-arranged, they headed for Calw by way of the Black Forest which, their mother reasoned, would be safer than by road. For the next 68 days the Dengler boys hiked through the forest, sleeping only briefly as they moved, living off the land as their mother had taught them. They made it safely, but it was an incredible ordeal.

The war ended in April 1945, but even in the period of prosperity and rebuilding that followed, Dieter Dengler never forgot the harsh lessons of the Black Forest.

In 1956, when he was 18, Dengler approached his mother and announced he was leaving Germany.

"I want to go to America," he said. Mrs. Dengler understood, and tried to conceal her sadness when, on May 6, 1957—16 days before his 19th birthday—her son sailed for the United States aboard the liner *SS America.*

The same year, he joined the U.S. Air Force as an enlisted man, tried to become a pilot, but was told that as an alien, it was forbidden. It was a small obstacle. Dengler was granted U.S. citizenship on August 3, 1960. After discharge from the Air Force and a period at San Francisco and San Mateo junior colleges, he was accepted for Navy flight training. He proudly accepted his single gold stripe and gold wings as a Navy flier and ensign in 1964.

That time, however, was long ago and far away from the blackened jungles of eastern Laos, where sleep now at last shut out the fateful events of the last 12 hours.

It was about 3 a.m., Dengler guessed, when he was awakened by a small jungle animal crawling across his leg. He sat up abruptly and despite his exhaustion, could sleep no more that night.

At daybreak, he moved out carefully through the jungle. "Several times that morning," he was to recall later, "I heard aircraft engines and tried desperately to contact them. But it was no use. . . I might as well have been on the moon."

Dengler's freedom did not last long. A few minutes before noon, as he stepped across a narrow trail, two men suddenly confronted him. Both wore U.S.-type shirts and trousers, sunglasses and rubber boots, hardly the attire of friendly mountain tribesmen. One carried a pistol, the other a rifle, and both were aimed at Dengler's stomach.

A few moments later, a third man joined them. Chattering a language Dengler could not understand, two of them jabbed their weapons at his midriff, while the third rummaged through his pockets, taking his watch, compass and other personal items. Dengler did not resist.

Forced to run at double time, he was nearly exhausted when they reached the first of a series of small villages they would enter that day.

Would he, Dengler wondered, be paraded through the settlement as a public curiosity as other downed American fliers had been?

Curiously, he noted that while the Laotians crowded the village's narrow dirt streets to get a look at him, they turned their heads when his eyes met theirs. But when he was led into a thatched hut and pushed onto a log seat, Dengler noticed, the villagers' curiosity overwhelmed them. At each crack in the wall he could see perhaps 20 sets of almond-shaped eyes studying him intently.

The rest of the day was spent traveling, through a succession of tiny mountain villages. The trek took longer than necessary, because his captors carefully skirted open clearings and trails which could be seen from the air. Twice, Dengler was flung to the ground when aircraft engines could be heard.

By nightfall, they arrived at their destination. It was a larger village than the others, and apparently a Pathet Lao provincial or regional headquarters. The settlement was clogged with communist guerrillas, each armed with modern weapons and wearing uniform-type clothing without insignia.

Up to now, Dengler had been treated without undue harshness by his captors. When he had paused on the day's journey, they had poked him annoyingly with their weapons, but none had struck him or shown signs of brutality.

Here, the leniency came to an abrupt halt. For Dieter Dengler, the night of February 2, 1966 was the beginning of an ordeal that might have shattered the will of a weaker man, perhaps even killed him. As a U.S. pilot, Dengler was a prize captive of the communists, in the weirdest, most unorthodox war in American history.

Shortly after dark, as Dengler huddled on the dirt floor of a hut hoping to sleep, an unusually large Pathet Lao soldier approached, cuffed him sharply across the side of the neck with an open hand and jerked a thumb in the direction of the door.

Dengler was led outside to a clearing in the middle of the village. There, he saw four wooden stakes, spaced in the earth in a rectangle slightly larger than his own body. He was pushed to the ground. Other soldiers lasheds his wrists and ankles with cord, tightening them until circulation was nearly cut off, then lashed the other end to the stakes, tightening the slack until Dengler was helplessly spread-eagled against the cold jungle earth.

When the troops left, Dengler wrenched violently against his bonds. But it was no use. With each movement, the thongs bit deeply into his skin until he could feel his own warm blood oozing from the wounds. Worse were the insects. Thousands of biting, stinging, insects. They crawled across exposed parts of his body, stinging sharply when, as he struggled, they became pinched between his clothing and body.

As the hours wore on, Dengler could feel leeches slithering up his trousers onto his legs; he could feel them beginning to suck the blood from his limbs. It was cold. Above, the tangled canopy of a thousand trees shut out even the stars. Off in the brush nearby, he could hear the noisy rattle of rats and other small animals as they scampered across dry banana leaves. Pain wracked his body. It was not until nearly dawn that he finally sank into a fitful sleep.

The second and third days of the capture—February 3rd and 4th—were much the same. Awakened at dawn, fed only a handful of rice, cuffed and poked at increasingly frequent intervals, Dengler for the next 48 hours was prodded onward—often at double time—from village to village. When he stumbled, he was beaten again. Through eyes swollen with insect bites, he studied the terrain as they moved, looking for clues to his location. But the monotonous sameness of the jungle offered nothing.

The language barrier only increased his misery. Several times, Dengler tried speaking in English to new guerrillas

who replaced others as they moved along. But the answer was only a shrug and an exchange of amused glances between the Laotians.

On the evening of February 4th, however, Dengler discovered a middle-aged province chief who spoke passable French. The chief, he learned, was a ranking official in the communist Pathet Lao guerrilla army who apparently had been active in the war years earlier against France.

Entering the hut, he approached Dengler and waved a dog-eared government document under the pilot's nose.

"You are German?" he asked, in French.

Dengler's hazel eyes widened in surprise as he recognized the document he had almost forgotten about. It was his expired German passport, an item he had long ago decided to carry with him to explain his heavy accent.

"No," Dengler replied, "I am an American citizen. I am German by birth, but I am an American."

The Laotian's eyes narrowed. "I do not believe you. If you are an American, why do you carry German papers?"

Each time Dengler tried to explain, the Laotian interrupted him with a wave of a fat hand.

"Your explanation is a lie. We have suspected that the Americans are employing mercenaries in their imperialistic war against the Vietnamese people. This," he shoved the passport under Dengler's nose again, "this proves it!"

The passport was to give Dengler considerable trouble, especially since the French-speaking Laotian could not read German or the passport's translation in French and English, and therefore had no reason to believe the document had long since expired.

Dengler urged him to read his Navy identification and Geneva Convention card which had been confiscated the first day, and pointed out that the U.S. Navy does not commission aliens or let them fly its airplanes in combat. But the protests, he knew, were useless.

Another thought then occurred to him. He suddenly realized that not only was he, as an American pilot, a prize prisoner, but the German passport, and its "German mercenary" implications, now gave the communists an unexpected new propaganda weapon. He had no doubt they would exploit it.

To Radio Peking's daily charges that the Americans were napalming innocent Vietnamese villagers, that they had imperialistic designs on Southeast Asia, that the bombing of North Vietnamese targets was illegal and immoral under international law, to this inflammatory propaganda they now could add the assertion—and convincingly document it—that the United States was implementing its forces with "hired gunmen" from nations not even formally involved in the war.

Although he did not fully realize it yet, the passport was also to make Dengler the target of harassment, torture and humiliation without parallel in the Vietnam war.

That night, he got a taste of what was to come.

First, he was ordered from the hut and led to a tree. His wrists were tied and his arms stretched to spreading limbs. Wordlessly, the French-speaking Laotian poked him in the stomach, leered, then nodded to a group of six guerrillas, each armed with a rifle. They took positions perhaps 20 feet away. To Dengler, the group looked exactly like a firing squad.

Dengler shut his eyes. He heard the click of six rifle bolts, a deafening roar. He felt the tree shudder as the bullets ripped into limbs and leaves inches from his head and body, *But he was alive!* He had not been touched. The aim—to miss—had been deliberate.

Next, one of the riflemen placed his weapon inches from Dengler's ear, but aiming away from his head, and pulled the trigger. The roar was to leave the young pilot partly deaf in that ear for months.

Later that night, Dengler asked to be allowed to write letters informing his mother and his fiancee, a pretty university research worker in Belmont, Calif., of his capture. To his surprise, the request was granted.

"You are required," the Lao chief told him when he had finished, "to sign your name at the bottom of each page." Dengler wondered about the order, but complied, then was led outside, where once again he spent the chilly night spread-eagled on the ground.

Several times that day, Dengler had been offered food, but the sight and taste of it repulsed him and he touched little of it. Now, as he lay pinned again to the cold jungle earth, he began to wish he had forced himself to eat anyway. That he would indeed do soon. In fact, in the weeks ahead, Dengler would learn, as he later described it, that next to freedom itself, food was the most precious thing in the world.

The next morning, February 6th, Dengler noticed as his bonds were untied, that feeling was ebbing from his left hand. He tried to double his fingers into a fist, but pain shot up his arm, and he gave up the attempt.

Later in the morning, he was led before the Lao chief. The chief handed him a single-page statement.

"Lieutenant," the Laotian said quietly, "you will sign this document." As Dengler's eyes scanned the paper, his face

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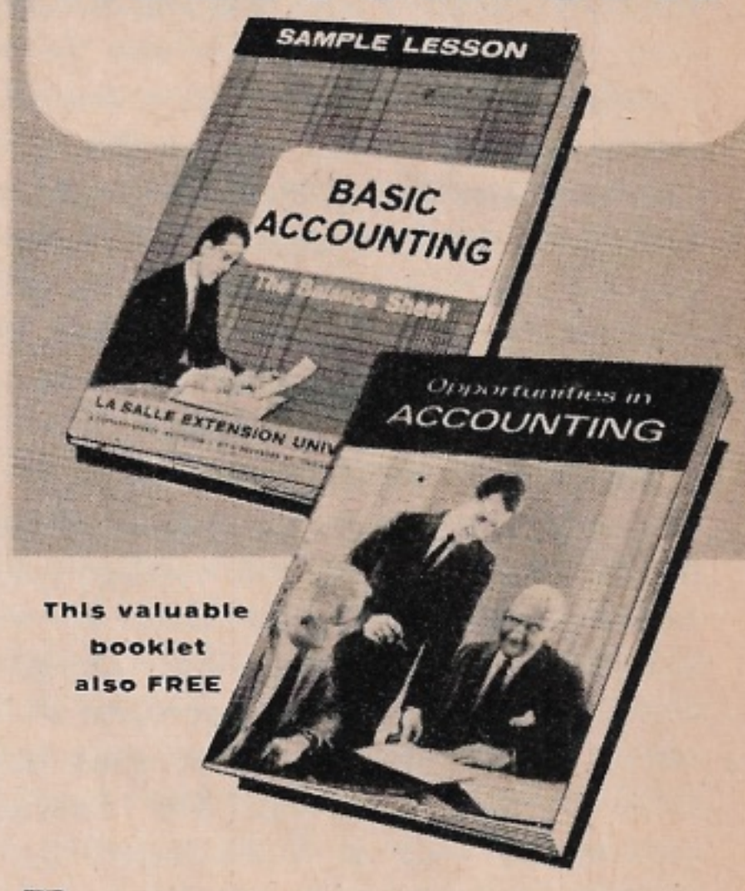

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reddened in anger. By signing it, he, Lt. Dieter Dengler, would be accusing the United States of committing a series of crimes against humanity in the Vietnam war. He shook his head.

"I will not sign," he said.

The Laotian merely shrugged and frowned.

"I am disappointed, Lieutenant. It would be much easier for you to do so. Now, I am afraid, we will have to persuade you."

The "persuasion" was as methodical as it was excruciatingly painful. For several hours, the pain which already wracked Dengler's body was increased by slow, torturous degrees. He was poked with sticks. He was lashed to a tree and beaten. Fists pounded against his chest and face. Mercifully, blackness engulfed him when the pain became too intense. But the lull of unconsciousness was only momentary. Each time, his "interrogators" revived him with cold water, and the beatings began again.

Periodically, the French-speaking Laotian ordered the beatings stopped, thrust the paper at Dengler, and watched for a surrendering nod of the head he was convinced would come. But Dengler, summoning a deep-rooted personal courage he had not had to call on since boyhood, refused to yield. The Laotian, puzzled as well as embarrassed by a stubbornness he could not fully understand, finally ordered Dengler untied.

Dengler was then led to a clearing in the jungle. His wrists were bound once again with one end of a 20-foot rope. The other end was fastened to the yoke of a water buffalo, which was then untethered. A whip cracked over the animal's flanks. Dengler felt his arms jerk forward with a force that seemed to pull them from their sockets. He tried to stay on his feet, but the effect of the earlier beatings made it impossible.

He soon passed out as the buffalo dragged him through jungle thickets, across open clearings and through stands of razor-sharp elephant grass which turned his skin into a mass of crimson. He did not regain consciousness until morning.

Escape! The word had never left Dengler's mind from the day of his capture a week earlier. He did not know how, but somehow he would escape. He made it a solemn promise to himself. As morning dawned and the harsh Asian sun forced him awake, Dengler for the first time began plotting escape seriously. But getting away was not enough.

Walking to freedom was out of the question. Beyond the rugged mountains and jungles of eastern Laos lay the forbidding expanse of communist North Vietnam. Even if he could reach South Vietnam, a distance of perhaps 300 miles, the areas of assured safety there were like grains of sand in a sea of Viet Cong. The only answer was rescue from the air. But how? The Pathet Lao had taken all his belongings; they had left him only the clothing on his back.

As the forced march resumed on the morning of February 7th, Dengler's mind raced with the thought of freedom. Again, he studied the terrain, his captors, their weapons. Then the sight of something protruding from the pack of one of the Laotians caught his eye. It was a *mirror.*

At dawn the next morning, after spending most of the night slipping his bonds and carefully loosening the board walls of his hut, Dengler decided to go. The guards had left both Dengler's shoes and sleeping bag in the hut, certain he was too securely bound to reach them. The young pilot bundled these under an arm and slipped quietly out of the hut.

The pack with the mirror was exactly where he had expected it to be, flung carelessly on the ground beside another hut. He pocketed the mirror and, with a casualness he had not anticipated, walked away from the unsuspecting, still-sleeping village.

For most of the day, Dengler forced himself to keep moving to outdistance the search parties he knew would quickly follow.

At dusk, he was leaving the safety of a thicket, he was alarmed by the sound of voices ahead. He dove back into the bushes. The voices came from a village and, when he saw it, his heart sank. It was the same one from which he had escaped that morning. Somehow, he had walked all day in a circle.

He allowed himself only a few moments to silently curse at this frustrating defeat; then moved onward again under cover of night. He slept little that night.

On the morning of February 9th, Dengler was awakened by the faint drone of an airplane. Frantically, he raced to a clearing, located the tiny dot in the sky, and tried signaling with the mirror. But the dot disappeared without a sign of recognition.

The sun boiled up angrily, as if it were an ally of the Pathet Lao punishing him for his audacious escape. It forced him to delay his journey long enough to look for a water hole. Finding one shortly before noon, he had barely begun to slake his thirst when his head exploded with pain from the impact of a heavy blow from behind.

When his eyes focused again, they were staring into a ring of Pathet Lao rifle muzzles. For Dengler, freedom had lasted less than two days.

As a punishment for escaping, Dengler was tied upside down to a tree limb by his heels with his face nearly touching the ground. His wrists were bound behind his back. Then the Laotians pushed dirt from an anthill toward him so that thousands of enraged, biting ants would crawl over his face. Blood rushed to his head, and he soon passed out. *But,* he thought, *at least I'm alive.*

The next five days—February 10th-14th—were spent traveling again. The routine was much the same as it had been before his escape. During the daylight hours, he was marched through the jungle at gunpoint (he noticed now that there were extra guards assigned to him). At night, they rested in a village, where Dengler was always shackled. Occasionally he was beaten, sometimes for "cause" and sometimes for what seemed pure, fiendish cruelty.

Once, he recalled later, a chicken wandered near a village cooking pot and he shooed it away. Two Laotians who had watched the incident beat him unmercifully afterwards. It was not until later that he learned he had violated a Laotian taboo by touching a chicken which was near food. He did not repeat the mistake.

On February 14th the column arrived at the village where they would remain for eight days. The total trip had taken two weeks, and despite the fact he was a prisoner, the absence of the long, daily march was refreshing.

The village itself was larger than the previous ones, and Dengler noticed that it was also better equipped. He saw several Soviet-type jeeps, buildings were the permanent type, and every Laotian had a modern hand weapon.

It was also the first time in two weeks that he saw other Americans. There were six of them, mostly pilots and air crewmen whose planes had been shot down over North Vietnam in previous months. Dengler was stunned at their physical condition. Some he barely recognized as human beings. They were badly undernourished, thin, pock-marked with hundreds of insect bites, and hollow-eyed. Many displayed unmistakable marks of torture.

To his further shock, Dengler learned that some of the prisoners had been there for as long as two years. However, despite their long captivity, all of them still longed for freedom and had never lost sight of it in their minds.

Dengler struck up an immediate friendship with an Air Force pilot, 1st Lt. Duane W. Martin, a 26-year-old native of Kansas City, Mo., whose wife and two children lived in Denver, Colo. Dengler had become interested in American history while studying for his U.S. citizenship; Martin, he learned, had been a history major in college and the fact established a warm bond between them.

There was no reading material in the camp, no recreation facilities, nothing to pass the long, lonely hours. "It would

help," Dengler said, "if we could devise some kind of game. Let's make it a quiz on U.S. history. That way we can both kill some time." The nightly routine became a favorite pastime.

On February 22nd, the prisoners were moved a short distance to a bamboo stockade three hours march away. The bamboo, thatched roof huts—called "bashers"—were to serve as home for the next four months and seven days that Dengler was to remain a prisoner of war.

Soon after his arrival, Dengler, Martin and the five other Americans began plotting escape in earnest. Except for Martin, who had been a prisoner only slightly longer than Dengler, all of them were in extremely poor physical condition. Dengler wondered if they could travel far, even if they got away safely. As best Dengler could figure, the camp was still in Laos—but much closer to the border of North Vietnam than the place of his crash.

That would make escape easier, perhaps. But at the same time, Dengler knew, he was growing weaker with each passing day. One night in late February, the seven met to discuss actual escape for the first time. No one vetoed the idea, the only question was timing.

One of the Americans, a Navy pilot in his early 30's who had been a captive for about six months, urged that they wait.

"In another few weeks," he argued, "the spring monsoons will be here. The rains will cover our tracks and it will be easier to get away because the Laotians won't be able to follow us."

Dengler and Martin disagreed. "We might be moved again, maybe farther away from the border," Dengler said. "Besides, each day we stick around we are less able to travel through the jungle. I say let's go now."

But the Navy pilot would not buy it. "Some of these men have been here two years," he said. "If it was just me, I'd say let's get out of here right now. But we've got to give them every advantage. We need the monsoons."

Reluctantly, Dengler and Martin agreed to go along with the majority. They would wait.

For Dengler, the next four months of prison camp life settled into a monotonous, frustrating, bitter nightmare. The beatings and torture had ceased. But the isolation, the loneliness, his increasing hunger and waning health became almost as bad.

During the first weeks, the food the prisoners were given, though meager, was at least consistent. Each man received a daily ration of rice in a sticky ball the size of an orange. But not long after they were moved to the stockade, a new prison commandant assumed charge and living conditions worsened rapidly. The rice ration was cut immediately. The prisoners learned this was not because the camp supply itself had been reduced, but that the guard's ration, which came from the main source, had been increased.

"We'll just have to find other food," Martin said one day, "or some of us won't make it."

Every living, flying, crawling thing became fair game. One night, Dengler spotted a snake crawling under the boards of his hut and quickly stamped it to death. As Martin was skinning it to eat, Dengler heard him suddenly roar with laughter. "We hit the jackpot," Martin said. "This character just ate two rats. That's better than Thanksgiving turkey!" They wolfed down the snake, rats and all.

The men began experimenting with grasses, roots and wild herbs they found growing in the compound, to augment their regular diet of rice, snakes and rats. Occasionaly, they caught and killed a chicken, carefully hiding their find until they could all share it, then burying the feathers and bones.

"Chicken was a real feast," Dengler said later. "We nicknamed them 'Cadillacs' because they were just as valuable. Even a taste of one was enough to keep you going for days. But they didn't go far . . . We figured a chicken had to feed all the prisoners for three days, before we could risk stealing another one."

By late June and early July, Dengler's own physical condition had deteriorated to the danger point. His original 159 pounds had dwindled to around 100. His hands, especially the left one, were "lame," as he put it, from being so tightly bound weeks before. His legs were cramped from lack of exercise, and he wondered seriously whether they still had the strength to carry him through an unknown jungle.

Each night, Dengler was shackled before being confined to his hut. But he had learned, with a little effort, how to slip from the bonds within a few minutes after the guards had left. Long into the night, over a period of weeks, he carefully pried at the wood wall boards of the hut until they were loose.

Meanwhile, he made a mental inventory of weapons he saw in the camp, of the road leading from it, and the clocklike routine of changing of the guard.

On the evening of June 28th, the prisoners conferred again.

"The monsoons," Dengler said, "are very late this year. I agree it would be safer to travel in wet weather, but we cannot wait any longer. Any day now we may be moved again and we will lose everything we have prepared and waited for. I think the time has come."

Silently, heads nodded in agreement.

The escape was set for the next morning, June 29th.

Exact details of the breakout are still shrouded in Navy secrecy, and understandably so. This is the way the official account reads:

"Dengler worked his way free of the foot blocks and the handcuffs, as he had done many times before, and slipped out the rear of his hut. He moved steathily and stole four guns—two M-1s, a carbine and a Chinese rifle—while the guards were eating.

"According to plan, Dengler passed the weapons out to his fellow prisoners. The escape was interrupted when two of them were spotted. The guards rushed out of the kitchen hut, saw Dengler, and fired at him. Dengler returned the fire and in the exchange, six of the guards were killed. The others scrambled into

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the jungle and fled."

The Navy account fails to answer several key questions: Did the escapees have any outside help? Had they somehow been contacted by counter-guerrilla forces who aided in planning the break-out? Did these same counter-insurgents create some kind of diversion—perhaps a firefight nearby—to provide cover for the escape?

Though denied by official sources, the presence of American or American-trained counter-insurgents in the jungles of "neutral" Laos and Cambodia is one of the worst-kept secrets to those on the scene in Southeast Asia. For diplomatic reasons, the United States must officially deny the presence of these clandestine forces. At the same time, with nearly 70 known Americans held prisoner by the communists and another 200 or so listed as "missing," it would be ridiculous to assume nothing is being done under cover to help free them.

However, since disclosure of such details obviously would hinder the escape of others, the details must justifiably remain classified, to be revealed only when the long war in Southeast Asia is finally terminated.

The published circumstances of the escape, however, made one fact patently clear: by killing six Pathet Lao, Dengler, Martin and the others pronounced their own death sentence. Execution was almost a certainty should they be recaptured.

To return to the details of the escape, in the confusion, Martin and Dengler were separated from the others, whose fate has never been learned. The two pilots managed to grab some meager foodstuffs before bolting the camp, but in their haste they were forced to leave without shoes. This fact, plus the strain of long months of idleness, poor diet and lack of exercise, was to cost them dearly in the days ahead.

Safely away from the prison compound, Dengler and Martin spent most of the first night and next day gaining distance on their pursuers.

"The toughest thing," Dengler remembered later, "was getting used to walking again. In prison, I had walked scarcely 30 yards at a time for five months."

They built a lean-to shelter the second night, July 1st, and ate some rice taken from the camp and snails found along a creek they had decided to follow.

Between July 1st and July 9th, they threaded their way carefully along the creek, finding it more difficult each day as it took them into a deep canyon where rock walls climbed almost straight up from the water's edge. Once they spent several hours building a crude raft, then watched in dismay as it slipped from their grasp and disappeared over a waterfall.

Both men now were seriously ill. Dengler had contracted yellow jaundice. Martin was in worse shape, with malaria. "You're in no condition for much more walking," Dengler finally told him. "We'll try it just another day or two, then we'll have to hole up somewhere and wait it out. Maybe we'll be lucky."

Twice, their journey took them through abandoned villages. In the first, on July 10th they found a native raft, decided to rest during most of the night, and use it to float down the river under cover of darkness just before dawn. About 4 a.m. they slipped the raft into the river and began drifting downstream.

About an hour later, as they rounded a sharp bend, the raft struck something hard and they heard a startled yell. Accidentally, they had bumped into a Laotian fisherman catching his morning meal. He was just as surprised as the two pilots, and fled.

"That does it," Dengler said. "In an hour the whole countryside will know about us. Let's find some shelter and wait it out."

The two men hid the raft under some weeds, spent the day slipping from one jungle thicket to another, and by nightfall on July 11th reached the second abandoned village.

They remained there four days. Although the rest was welcomed, Martin was by now almost delirious with fever, and the morale of both men was ebbing with each passing hour.

"The nights were the worst," Dengler recalled later. "It's raining and you're shivering and you hold on to each other. You put your cheek next to your buddy and you're afraid together, and you cry together, and you pray to go home and be free. Or sometimes you think, man, wouldn't it be great not to even wake up because it's so miserable. And the worst thing is that someone is hunting you all the time."

Dengler left camp once during the four days to find a clearing where he could signal if a friendly aircraft was spotted. But he saw none. Deciding to gamble, he gathered a bundle of dry brush and lit a signal fire. Still no aircraft. Again, they decided to push on.

The next morning, July 16th, the 17th day of their escape, two half-walking, half-crawling figures stumbled out of the abandoned village and began moving erratically through the jungle. Martin was near death now. Dengler, buoyed by the fact that his friend's life depended largely on his own courage and stamina, lent his own remaining strength to help him travel.

The trail became fuzzy. No longer was it a matter of following a set course. Traveling now broke down to planting one aching foot in front of the other in the hope of gaining perhaps another hundred yards before collapsing into a stupor.

Late in the morning, they found themselves on the outskirts of still another village. Praying that it was abandoned, they approached the nearest of three huts.

Cautiously, Dengler peered inside. Through swollen eyelids he saw a small, dark figure staring back at him. Then the Laotian in the hut leaped to his feet. In his hand he carried a long, curved machete. His yelps brought three more villagers on the run, and they swung their own weapons wildly as they ran.

The brief, bloody encounter lasted less than a minute. The Laotians first attacked Martin who was far too weak to move quickly. One of them swung a blade at his legs, cuting one of them deeply. The second dealt a fatal blow to Martin's neck and shoulder.

Dengler saw Martin crumble, as he himself dodged the swing of another machete which missed his chest by inches. With his remaining strength, he ran into the nearby jungle. He hid there all day. That night, he slipped back into the village and burned it to the ground.

Now he was utterly alone.

The details of the next four days are difficult for Dengler to remember. He was, almost literally, a walking dead man, delirious, too tired to look for food, hardly conscious of the leeches and mosquitoes that assaulted him, sure of only one thing: *he would die rather than be recaptured.*

But somehow, Dengler's actions formed a sensible pattern during those four days.

Shortly before dawn on the morning of July 17th, he heard the faint drone of an airplane. He struggled to a nearby clearing and lit a signal fire. The sky suddenly blossomed with light from a parachuted signal flare. For the first time in weeks, Dengler forced himself to smile. The next morning he located the parachute on a nearby ridge, tore it into strips, and laid out an "SOS" on the hillside.

Twice, when help still did not come, he thought about attempting to travel along the river again, but gave up the idea as too risky.

The night of July 19th-20th was a delirious blur. It was on this night that Dengler saw chariots and skiers and heard voices. The memory of the past 5½ months haunted him until dawn. The end, he feared, was near.

The sound he heard, at 11 a.m. July 20, 1966, was like sweet music. To Dengler, it was as familiar as his own heartbeat. Over the murmur of a morning breeze rustling the thick jungle

foliage, over the trickle of a stream babbling nearby, he heard it grow louder and louder. He had heard it many times, and he recognized it instantly. It was the purring single engine of an American Skyraider attack bomber, the kind he had flown himself many months before.

In a minute, he saw the tiny dot low on the horizon, coming closer. Dengler stumbled to the ridge he had marked with his SOS, said a silent prayer, and began waving with the last strength he could muster. The Skyraider, piloted by Air Force Lt. Col. Eugene Deatrich, droned on for a minute without recognition, then abruptly changed course and began circling over the tiny figure on the ground. ("It was just by chance, a million-to-one shot, that I even saw Dengler," Deatrich said later.)

Rescue!

An Air Force rescue helicopter, piloted by Capt. William E. Cowell, wasn't far behind. A sling was lowered, Dengler strapped himself in and was pulled to safety. He felt himself pulled onto the floor of the craft, heard and felt the chopper pull away from the jungle. He reached out for the first thing he could see—the leg of a crewman—and clutched it tightly.

Then, very quietly and without shame, Dieter Dengler cried.

What followed is recent history. Flown first to Danang for immediate treatment and debriefing (where he learned for the first time he had walked from Laos into North Vietnam, where he was rescued), Dengler reached the United States on July 27th, and was placed under recuperative care at the U.S. Naval Hospital, San Diego, Calif.

Almost miraculously, in less than three months he had regained most of his normal 159 pounds. To date, he is the only American prisoner of the Vietnam war to have escaped through North Vietnam.

For 60 dramatic minutes on September 13th Dengler related his story at a press conference in San Diego's North Island Naval Air Station. Then he was flown to Washington to repeat it two days later before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

"I know now," he quietly told the senators, who gave him a standing ovation, "that freedom is the greatest value that can ever be taken away from you. Once it is gone, then you miss it. It's great to be alive."

As much as anyone, Dieter Dengler should know. ★ THE END

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